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ABSTRACT

In the context of findings from the recent nationwide studies and reports on the status of education, this paper focuses on the program assessment, instructional planning, and resource allocation efforts of the Rochester (New York) School District. The first phase, the Rochester Assessment Project, began with informal meetings between the superintendent and various constituencies, from which impressions were obtained about the strengths and weaknesses of the district. This information was verified with more formal assessment procedures, and a database was compiled on such issues as demography, achievement, attendance, student mobility, suspension, student loss, and special education. On the basis of this information, consensus was reached about necessary program changes, and a tentative 3-year course of action was outlined. As an illustration of how planning is related to assessment, one of the 18 initiatives in the 3-year plan, a regrouping of the seventh and eighth grades, is described as a response to findings from the assessment project. The final section describes how money and resources were allocated by the superintendent and the board to implement the project. A summary, in which the interdependence of program assessment, instructional planning, and resource allocation is reemphasized, concludes the paper. (TE)

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TYING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND INSTRUCTIONAL
PLANNING TO THE ALLOCATION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

BY

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PLANNING TO THE ALLOCATION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

Nineteen hundred eighty-three was clearly the year for educational studies. For a while, summaries of various findings concerning schooling appeared in newspapers across the country almost on a weekly basis.

Since the National Commission on Excellence in Education presented its final report in April 1983, numerous reports have discussed the status of education in our country. Not only has the education community read and heard about reports from the Education Commission of the States, Ernest Boyer, TheodoreSizer, John Goodlad and Mortimer Adler -- just to list a nucleus of the national studies -- but state departments of education have also been actively involved in critiquing the status of education. The New York State Board of Regents and Commissioner of Education have proposed a statewide Action Plan for New York. The California Superintendent of Public Instruction recently proposed his Master Plan for Excellence in Education for that state. Many local school districts have also begun the process of extensively documenting educational issues of concern within their classrooms and schools.

What does all this information mean, and how can it effectively be utilized to improve the quality of education within our public schools? This paper focuses on the program assessment, instructional planning, and resource allocation efforts of Rochester, New York, as our District rapidly moves toward educational reform.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

The numerous national studies describe in depth the many problems facing educators throughout the country. A great deal of information, therefore, has been researched, analyzed, and presented to the public. In the book Using What We Know About Teaching, Philip Hosford discusses how educators use knowledge they have obtained about teaching, supervision, curriculum development and performance. The author raises several questions about the difficulties associated with the use of knowledge:

How do we gain the knowledge we need?
How do we verify that knowledge? If it
is true, how do we judge its value?¹

Although Hosford focuses on professionals gaining knowledge and translating it into instructional practices, the questions raised in his analysis are quite applicable to the use administrators make of the many studies concerning the status of education in America today.

Program assessment information at the national level does not equal similar program assessment data in our numerous local school districts. Local decisions by superintendents and their boards must continue to determine the future direction for educational reform and improvement if we are to strive realistically to improve programs for our own students.

Local districts will make a serious mistake if they run too quickly to embrace the many reforms suggested in the numerous studies. Some of the suggestions are contradictory. Others will not be applicable to local needs!!

¹Philip Hosford, "Introduction: The Problem, Its Difficulties, and Our Approaches," Using What We Know About Teaching (Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984), p. 4.

This may seem to be an unwarranted piece of advice. The history of open education, individualized instruction, "back to basics," and the many other "we need to do it too" reforms implemented across the country tell us a different story. Many good ideas and recommendations are outlined in the national studies. I am only suggesting that we find out what is needed in our individual districts before final reform decisions are made.

The Rochester Assessment Project

Assessment, planning, and the allocation of resources can come in all shapes and forms. One model is probably not more successful than another. What is important, however, is that there be a commitment to utilizing these three major elements as the basis for program improvement. One element without the other two will not equal success. Utilizing all three, it is my belief, is an excellent prescription for educational reform and successful program implementation. Again, how do we gain the knowledge we need? How do we verify that knowledge? If it is true, how do we judge its value?

When I first arrived in Rochester as Superintendent in October 1980, I began a comprehensive assessment of the status of education in the school system. I held individual meetings with a number of persons and groups in order to assess their understandings, feelings, and ideas about education in Rochester. I met with parents. I met with community agency representatives, City and County officials, teachers, administrators, Board members, and students. In addition to these personal interaction sessions and meetings, this new Superintendent held four community forums. The purpose of these sessions was to elicit, from all who wanted to speak, information about their perceptions of our schools. In addition, various position papers were drafted by a number of staff members

outlining for me the status of various programs within the District. With the assistance of several staff members, I began the process of analyzing the preliminary data I had collected about the perceptions of the users and observers of the Rochester City School District.

No, this was not a scientific study. It was not a formal assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the District. This was an initial snapshot of the impressions that the Superintendent was obtaining about the strengths and weaknesses of the City School District after an initial survey.

I first gleaned knowledge of the local School District's strengths and weaknesses through a preliminary assessment process. This information was verified through a more formal assessment procedure. I then authorized the District to begin to develop a Data-Base. This information or knowledge was to be used to help clarify the status of education in our District. From all the various data available to me in 1981, a tentative course of action was outlined in Rochester's Preliminary Three-Year Planning Document in order to clarify our educational direction for the next three years.

Data was collected and then analyzed concerning issues such as demography, achievement, attendance, student mobility, suspension, student loss, and Special Education. Assessment information clearly demonstrated that the District's seven-year effort to improve reading had been successful. In 1975, 36.4 per cent of all Rochester elementary school students were reading in the lowest quartile. In 1981, that percentage had been lowered to 17.3 per cent.

Data concerning student attendance indicated that the City School District fared very well in comparison to the other "Big Five" districts in New York State for half-day kindergarten through third grade, and for grades 4-6. Rochester did not fare as well in grades 7, 8, and 9.

These and other assessments were used to verify some preliminary knowledge we had about our own District's strengths and weaknesses. We judged the significance of our information by reaching some consensus about the types of program changes that were needed in order to improve education in our elementary and secondary schools. Long-term significance would be judged on the basis of how well students improved over time once personnel, materials, and other resources were allocated. Initial assumptions, however, about the value and feasibility of approximately 18 elementary and secondary reform initiatives were made based on the judgment of the Superintendent and Board after a thorough analysis of all data and information available to us at the time. No matter what the national data suggests, no matter what the local data points out, program decisions do have to be made based on the best judgment of some individual or individuals associated closely with the day-to-day activities of the school district.

As pointed out by Ronald Brandt in his "Overview" for the November 1983 issue of Educational Leadership, school improvement projects are becoming more successful in many areas of the country because educators are becoming better planners, and projects are becoming more focused and better defined. Educators, he points out, have become less interested in doing things differently, and more interested in doing things better.² This clearly has been the focus of the three-year planning effort of the Rochester City School District.

²Ronald Brandt, "Overview," Educational Leadership, Vol. 41, No. 3 (November 1983), p. 3.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING

The City School District's Three-Year Plan is now the cornerstone for major reform in our elementary and secondary schools. Each of the 18 major projects is guided by a project manager. Each project is summarized through a clearly written planning objective, a problem statement, a District response, and a project timeline. In addition, detailed work-plans specify the various activities, personnel involved in the initiatives, dates when these activities are to take place, the resources needed, and the specific dollars that have been allocated for implementing the projects. Evaluation criteria and designs have been built into the planning process for a number of initiatives. Other evaluations are in the process of being developed, and will be associated with the project during the next three-year cycle.

A summary list of the three-year planning recommendations is outlined for the reader's review. Sample planning packets are also being distributed for the participants in today's session.

An Example of How One Initiative Was Tied to Assessment

Like many other districts, Rochester has faced the issue of declining enrollment.

In a two-year period (school years 1981-82 and 1982-83), seven elementary schools and one high school were closed. In the process of looking at school and student consolidation, the improvement of education for our junior high school population was a major issue and received a great deal of study. Should the District continue its K-6 and 7-12 organizational structure? Would a K-6, separate junior high, and 9-12 program provide a much better educational design? Would a K-5 program accompanied by a 6th, 7th and 8th grade middle school program be more

feasible? Or should the District consider an elementary school K-8 design and a secondary 9-12 program as the best opportunity to deliver quality services?

As pointed out earlier, the attendance patterns for Rochester's 7th, 8th, and 9th graders were poor. In addition, we found that the suspension rate for this same group was high. Our analyses further indicated that the gains made in reading by elementary school students were not carried beyond the 6th grade as a part of our upward trend line. Junior high school students were not achieving as well as we would have expected in the areas of reading and math, based on their 5th and 6th grade test scores. Clearly, the junior high school population in Rochester needed some attention from the system.

The Junior High School Cluster

A decision was made by the Superintendent to recommend the clustering of 7th and 8th grade students within each of our 7-12 schools. Students and teachers would be grouped together in order to bridge the gap between the self-contained environment of the elementary schools and the more open, departmentalized program of grades 9-12. A set group of teachers would have the opportunity to plan and to coordinate the delivery of services for each cluster of approximately 130 students. The cluster program would focus on better curriculum planning, better knowledge of the problems and strengths of the students, and a more articulated program effort.

From an educational design perspective, as Superintendent I would have preferred a junior high school or middle school program, but such a major transformation was not feasible in our District at the time. Locating junior high students and teachers together in the same area of the building was an alternative which became part of the cluster design.

The 7th and 8th grade cluster project is just one example of the 18 initiatives outlined in Rochester's Three-Year Plan. Although local District officials are quite proud of our planning efforts, we know that school officials frequently applaud their own undertakings. We were delighted, therefore, that the American Educational Research Association selected the Rochester Preliminary Three-Year Planning Document and its Operational Planning Manual as the "best report of findings from a policy analysis" from among all the plans entered in the 1983 competition. As Brandt has stated, educators are becoming better planners and districts are focusing on implementing well-designed programs.³

ALLOCATION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Program assessments and instructional planning are only valuable if changes can occur within a school district by using the information and knowledge available in a constructive, systematic manner. The allocation of resources to accomplish the task at hand is critical. In the example of our Rochester clusters, money and resources were indeed allocated by the Superintendent and the Board to implement the project.

A cluster administrator has been funded and assigned to each of the six 7-12 secondary schools. This individual reports directly to the principal and has a status similar to that of the vice-principal. The cluster administrator's major responsibility is to serve as the educational leader for all junior high cluster teachers and students in each of the six schools.

³Ibid.

A restructuring of the assignment of counselors and deans in each of the schools has also been initiated. Each cluster is now served by a dean and a counselor. This allows a complete team of teachers and support staff to focus on providing an improved educational program and environment for junior high youngsters for most of the school day. Inservice training, the procurement of materials, and the establishment of staff planning time are all critical and important to the success of the cluster program. The allocation of money, personnel, and resources is a key link in any improvement effort.

Although our attention has focused on the allocation of resources to the junior high cluster project, similar support has been appropriated to the other reform initiatives. Contained in the Rochester 1983-84 budget is a section which outlines each of the Three-Year Plan initiatives and the financial allocations approved by the Superintendent and the Board of Education. Over \$2,000,000 in capital expenditures and \$1,100,000 in general operating funds were earmarked specifically for reform. No, this was not enough. But it was quite a beginning for our District.

SUMMARY

Rochester's Preliminary-Three-Year Plan was published in April 1982, about a year before A Nation at Risk. The final three-year planning document was approved in March 1983 by the Board of Education. Rochester, as well as many other districts across the country, is not in need of educational insights about "how to fix public education." We believe we are well on the way to implementing successfully a number of elementary and secondary initiatives.

Program assessment, instructional planning, and the allocation of financial resources are the key ingredients in major reform. Although each district may attack its problems and try to build on its own successes, there is a great deal of similarity in the approaches used in successful projects. Districts indeed have to gain knowledge or understandings about their programs. Some educators call this "program assessment." A master plan with clear objectives, program descriptions outlining how a District will resolve its instructional problems, and a project timeline also need to be developed.

Finally, districts must put their money behind their projects if they desire success. It is very difficult to "hope" a project along. There is no magic in successful program implementation. There is only a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. Finally, there also has to be some money!!